

## Jim Corbett—Lifesaver and Humanist

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**E**dward James Corbett, popularly known as Jim Corbett, was born at Nainital in 1875. His parents were Irish. His forefathers came to India from Ireland for job opportunities. Mother of Jim Corbett, Mary Jane, when she was 21 years old with three children, lost her husband who was killed during the Sepoy Mutiny. Then Mary married Christopher William Corbett, who was Irish and a widower with three children. Then Christopher settled as postmaster at Nainital, where he built a house known as 'Garni House.' Jim was their eighth child.

Since Nainital is very cold in winter, William Corbett built another house at village 'Kaladhungi', which was at a much lower height and less cold. It was the winter residence of the family. Also they had some land there for cultivation.

Corbett studied in a school at Nainital. From 1895 to 1915/16, young and enterprising Corbett undertook contractual work for the then Bengal and North Western Railway. For this he stayed at Mokama Ghat in Bihar most of the time, and had contract for transferring goods including coal from broad gauge to metre gauge at Mokama Ghat.

While working there, he joined the British army during the First World War. He recruited 5000 soldiers from Kumaon and Garhwal and took them to France and Waziristan. For this achievement he was promoted first to the rank of a Major and then a Lieutenant Colonel.

Corbett's hunting of maneaters started with the killing of a Champawat tigress in 1907 and ended with the killing of a Thak

tigress after 31 years in 1938. He stayed with his immediate elder sister, Maggie. None of them were married. Their house at Kaladhungi has been made the Corbett Museum by U. P. Government. The house at Nainital was sold to Mr P. K. Verma. The Government has been trying to acquire it. I do not know its recent status.

Corbett had a high opinion about tigers. He wrote that 'The tiger is a brave, large-hearted animal. When they would disappear due to large-scale killing by hunters, then India would lose its finest fauna. So we need to conserve tigers.' The Government of India, thereafter set up a National Park in 1957 covering a large area at the foothills of the Garhwal Himalayas, and, in honour of Jim Corbett, it was named the Corbett National Park.

Corbett killed only man-eating tigers and leopards to save the innocent and poor people. He was a humanist. He loved the poor people, mixed with them as friend and helped them in their distress. The people in that region used to fondly call him 'Carpet Sahib'. His sister Maggie took training as a paramedical staff. She kept medicines at their house in Kaladhungi and treated people who came to her free of cost. Corbett was also regarded by all for his character. Even women of conservative families did not hesitate to come out before him.

From childhood Corbett was enamoured with nature. He used to roam about in hills and forests with a primitive gun. He mastered mimicking calls of animals and birds and learnt local languages and Hindusthani from the people. He received

training in hunting in his early years from his elder brothers and some others. He was very brave and had all the qualities of a good hunter. He was a sharp shooter who could shoot tigers even from the ground. He had great observation power and could sense the movements of animals and tigers.

#### **Leopard of Rudraprayag**

In 1918 there was an influenza epidemic in which about a million people died in India, including many in Garhwal region. Since cremation was difficult for such a large number, many dead bodies were thrown in jungles. This was when the leopard tasted human flesh and got addicted to it. That was the reason why it started killing humans after that. In 1918 one became its first victim and the last one happened to be in 1926, when Corbett killed it. Corbett has described the episode in a book published in 1948.

The leopard struck terror for these eight years in about 500 square miles area. Rudraprayag is a town on the Ganges where the rivers Mandakini and Alakananda joined the Ganges. The town is on the pilgrimage route—Hardwar—Rishikesh—Devaprayag—Srinagar—Rudraprayag. From Rudraprayag there was bifurcation. Following Mandakini one can reach Kedarnath at a height of approximately 13000 ft. and following Alakananda one can reach Badrinath at a height of approximately 13200 ft.

From the reports collected from various sources, it was officially estimated by the U. P. Government that the said leopard had killed 125 people. The Government had sent William Ibbotson as the Deputy Commissioner of Garhwal and he was urged to kill the leopard at the earliest. Ibbotson requested Corbett to join him and kill the leopard.

Corbett stayed 10 weeks with Ibbotson at the Inspection Bungalow at Rudraprayag.

He used to move about either alone or with Ibbotson night after night in the jungle and take up position on tree at a location where he expected to find the leopard that night. Occasionally he suspected that the animal was stealthily following him and looking for an opportunity to jump on him. Imagine the courage and bravery of Corbett!

Like a hunter of long experience Corbett could study pugmarks of tigers and leopards. His conclusion was that the leopard was an old male with defective gait due to some injury. Popular opinion was that the leopard crossed Alakananda by swimming. But Corbett did not believe that. He guessed that the animal was using the hanging bridge to cross the river. So, for several nights he sat on the watch-tower of the bridge, but could not find the animal. Therefore he concluded that the leopard must be roaming around the jungle where the Inspection Bungalow was located.

Both Corbett and Ibbotson got naturally worried. Though they had other urgent assignments elsewhere, they were reluctant to leave the people at the mercy of the leopard. One day, at 9 pm Corbett went up on a makeshift platform on the tree, and took position with the rifle fitted with a torch. A goat with a bell around its neck was tied to the tree with a long rope. At 10 pm, he guessed that the leopard was on the goat. He immediately focussed the torch and fired.

It was dark. The moon rose a few hours later. From the ringing of the bell Corbett knew that the goat was unhurt. Since the torch got extinguished because of old batteries, he could get down only in early morning and following the blood trail he found the dead leopard. Then four persons sent by Ibbotson with lantern and bamboo rod carried the dead leopard to the Inspection Bungalow. As Corbett had presumed, the leopard was found to be old with several injuries.

Ibbotson sent telegrams to many. He also sent messages to local people. After tea and warm water bath Corbett came out of his room. The people brought flowers and placed them at his feet as a mark of their gratitude. It was 2 May, 1926. Every year, on that day, Corbett Mela is held there to celebrate the event.

Another book of Corbett, *My India*, was published in 1952. It narrates stories of poor people, most of whom, according to Corbett, were honest, brave and hardworking.

Corbett recognized the geographical, ethnic, ecological and religious diversities of India. But in this book, he restricts himself to the description of people with whom he had interactions. That is why the title of the book is *My India*. In the first few pages there is a description of Nainital and surrounding areas as viewed from the China peak with naked eye and telescope. The description is superb and reads like poetry.

Once in winter Corbett accompanied Mr Anderson, who was then the Government Superintendent in the Terai region. They set up camp at a short distance from a village. Local people helped them. The specific purpose for setting up of the camp was to listen to the grievances and complaints of people and give verdict on them. People used to respect his verdict because Mr Anderson was supposedly a compassionate person. They obeyed the verdict and took actions on them without demur. Imagine the simplicity of the system and convenience in comparison to litigations in courts and consequent harassment.

I give you an example. The water of the irrigation canal in that region was supposed to be shared by two villages. But there was not enough rain one year. So one village took the entire water and as a result the other village had no cultivation. Anderson ordered that the crop was to be shared by the two villages in proportion to their cultivable

lands. It was accepted by all as a reasonable proposition.

There is a common saying that, in war and other violent acts, Law of Jungle prevails. That means violence occurs without any moral or ethical considerations. But Corbett gave examples from his own experience that animals in jungles also have a compassionate mind and they do not indulge in unnecessary violence. This is evident from some events that Corbett narrates. The following is one.

Harkoar and Kunti were husband and wife. They had to work hard to earn their living. They decided to spend a few months at Kaladhungi. But because of their workload they could not pay proper attention to their children—son three years old and daughter two years old. A compassionate but partially crippled old woman was living in a hut adjacent to the forest. She told the helpless couple that she would look after their children. But one evening, after returning from the market, they were aghast to find that the children were missing. Frantic search for about three days and complaint to the police station did not help. The forest had some cruel animals like bear, hyena, tiger, etc.

It so happened that a man was tending buffaloes in the forest. Then following the buffaloes, he found both the children sleeping and unhurt. He somehow carried them and brought them to their parents. Imagine! No animal had touched these children out of compassion. Once Corbett himself saw that a kid was innocently approaching a tiger, but the tiger did not hurt it.

#### **The story of noble Chamari**

Corbett has described the story of Chamari. He belonged to a scheduled caste. He came to Corbett at Mokama Ghat with his wife and two little children. They were in

torn clothes and looked sickly due to lack of proper nutrition. Corbett first allotted some work to them but found soon that they would not be able to do it. Then Corbett asked Chamari whether he knew reading and writing. Chamari said he knew some Hindi.

Some days before Corbett had dismissed the chief of coal workers because of his drunkenness. So Corbett appointed Chamari for keeping records of coal wagons unloaded and he was so impressed with Chamari's work that he made him the chief of coal labourers who numbered about two hundred. The workers were paid weekly on Sunday evening by Chamari and Corbett.

Chamari was very honest. He was also very compassionate and was always ready to help anyone who was in distress. When Corbett had spent 16 years at Mokama Ghat, the First World War started. He was away to France and Waziristhan. During his absence, besides Chamari, he made Ramsaran as transshipment inspector, and the work was carried out smoothly.

After Corbett returned to Mokama Ghat, there was an outbreak of cholera epidemic in Bengal. Corbett and Chamari started to nurse sick persons by turn. Unfortunately, as a consequence, Chamari himself became critically ill with cholera. Corbett and some others nursed him, but he could not be saved. He told Corbett that Parameshwar was calling him and he would have to go. Then he breathed his last. During the cremation of Chamari, innumerable persons of all kinds were present. This included a priest of the Vishnu temple of Varanasi who also paid homage to Chamari. What a tribute to a so-called lowcaste person who first came for a job in torn clothes!

At Mokama Ghat there was heavy workload for all. Corbett and others were paying attention to the welfare of all, and the railway management was happy with their performance. When Corbett had earned a

good amount of money he felt somewhat relaxed. With the initiative of Ramsaran, a primary school was started for children of persons working with Corbett as well as the children of the railway employees. To start with, it had one teacher and 20 students, and was named 'Ramsaran's school'. Gradually it had seven teachers and about 200 students. Then the Government took the financial responsibility of the school and raised its status to middle-level English school. Ramsaran was bestowed with the honour 'Roy Saheb'.

Tom Keley was very enthusiastic about sports. At his and Corbett's initiative, a recreation club was started. Playground for football and hockey was prepared. Later the Railways erected an indoor club for billiards and table tennis for the Europeans there.

There was steamer service for crossing the Ganges. It could take about 700 passengers in each trip. Corbett was in charge of this service, and he came across so many varieties of people from all over India and Nepal. He has described in his books some incidents. For example, Christmas used to be celebrated by all in a befitting manner at the office. On this occasion Corbett used to distribute most of his earnings among the people gathered there. Later, as a benevolent humanist, Corbett instructed the publishers of his books that all earnings from the royalty, in future, should be donated to the poor and the needy.

#### **Thak man-eater**

I have already mentioned that Corbett's last kill was the Thak man-eater in 1938. Thak was a village in Kumaon near the Nepal border. The man-eater was a tigress. It appeared at noon one day when a girl was picking up windfalls from a mango tree at Kot Kindri, a few miles away from Thak. The tigress suddenly came and carried her off in full view of the villagers. Few days

later an old woman was also killed in a similar fashion.

Corbett went to Thak with Ibbotson, who had then become the Deputy Commissioner of Nainital, Almora and Garhwal. They were accompanied by Mrs Ibbotson. Report came that a buffalo was missing. The tigress had killed it but could not carry it far since it was heavy and there were ravines. So Corbett and Ibbotson decided to set up a makeshift 'machan' on a tree near the kill. It was very uncomfortable to sit there whole night. But the tigress did not come. Next morning Ibbotson came and escorted him to the camp. Corbett stayed in the camp with two servants and some coolies. Like Ibbotson he was also scheduled to depart because of some urgent work elsewhere. But, in the morning a contingent of men from surrounding villages came and begged him not to leave them at the mercy of the man-eater. Corbett promised to return after a month.

In the meantime one person was killed at Thak. Upon his return Corbett found the entire village abandoned due to fear of the man-eater. From pug marks Corbett found that the tigress had followed him. Years of strain and exposure was telling on his health as well. It was 24 November. He decided that, if by 30th he could not kill the man-eater he would have to abandon further efforts and return to Nainital. On his last day at Thak, Corbett was deeply worried that the man-eater was still around. As November is the mating season of tigers, they become

very violent at that time. And the tigress was roaming around and giving mating calls.

It would be dark very soon with no chance of killing the tigress. So Corbett settled on a suitable ground and decided to give mating calls. He gave the call and the tigress answered and started coming towards Corbett. The servants and goats were standing behind little below and they were frozen with fear. When the tigress came near in full view, Corbett shot it twice and killed it. The recoil from the rifle threw him up in the air and he fell on the servants, who caught him to prevent his injury. Even then his jaw and cheeks were hurt seriously for which long treatment was required.

Then Corbett sent a stream of bullets in the air to indicate the killing of the man-eater. The villagers came running through the jungle without fear. Then a camp-fire was lit on the open space in the village and the dead tigress was brought there. Corbett left early next morning although he had injury.

I am quoting Corbett's concluding remarks as follows: 'There have been occasions when the life was hung by a thread and others when a light purge and disease resulting from exposure and strain have made going difficult, but for all these occasions I am amply rewarded if my hunting has resulted in saving one human life.'

In 1947 Corbett along with his sister left India and settled at Nyeri in Kenya.

What a noble man Corbett was! My salutations to him! ■

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